dear gayla: the root cellar of our dreams?

DEAR GAYLA: I wanted to write immediately, because if anyone would understand this latest mad urge, it would be you. Oh help me, please, but I want a root cellar in the very worst way.

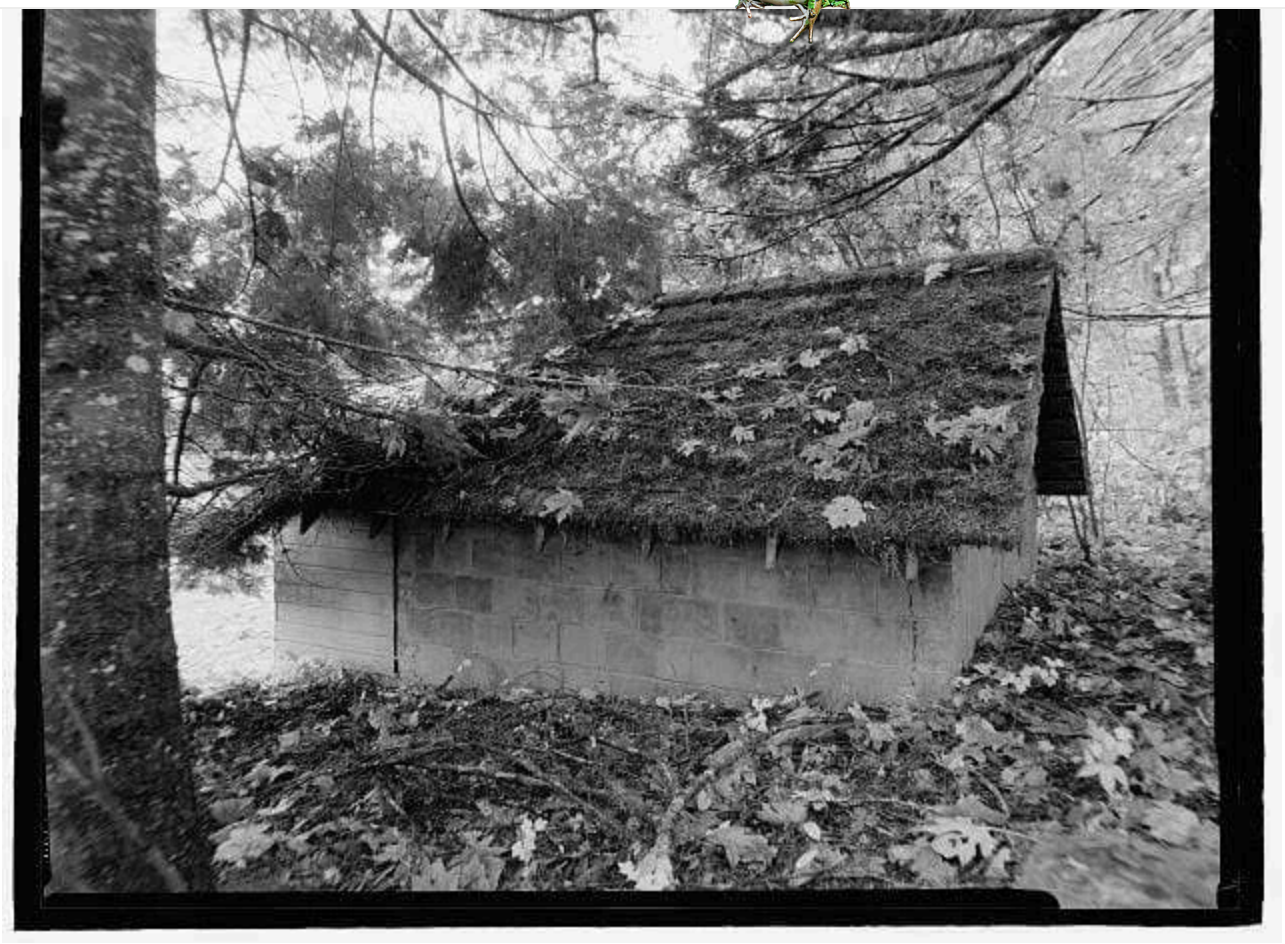
a series of letters to a friend

'DEAR GAYLA' is how each installment of occasional "out-loud" letters to my garden-blogging friend Gayla Trail of You Grow Girl [dot] com begins. If you want to backtrack, here are links to the first and second letters in our series.

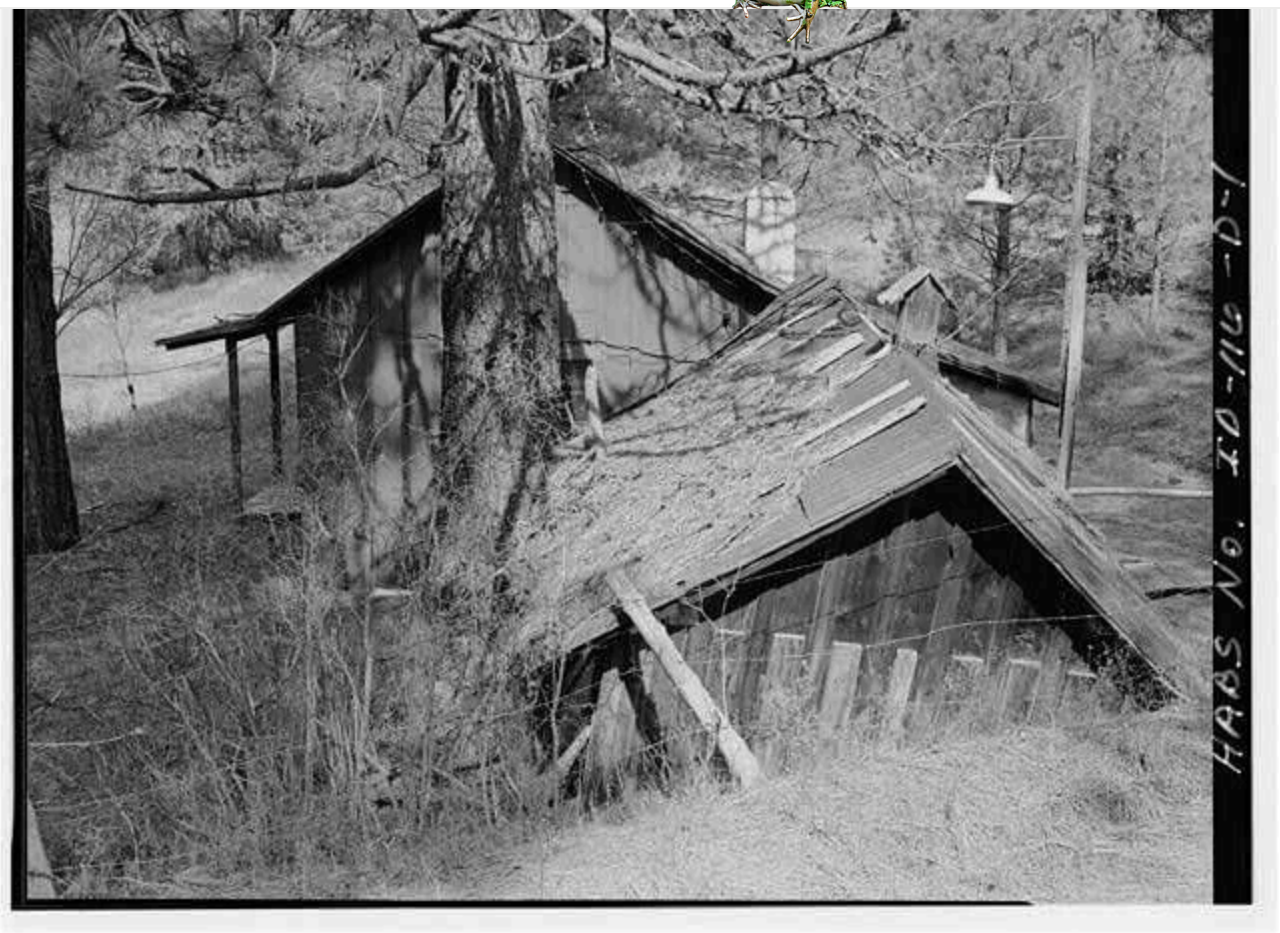
The latest longing for a way to store my garden produce properly overtook me last week, when I was looking for images of roots (as in those ant-farm-like diagrams of a cross-section beneath the soil surface of the prairie). One of the "autofill" suggestions that appeared when I started typing r-o-o-t into a Library of Congress photo-archive search was the phrase "root cellar," and I could not resist.

Suddenly, down the rabbit hole into underground repositories of yesteryear I went, touring historic root cellars around the United States that had been surveyed as part of a Historic American Building Survey for the National Park Service, I believe.

I couldn't help myself; I started clicking on them, imagining carrots and beets, cabbages and apples, potatoes and parsnips and who knows what else all happily tucked in their respective corners. Of cellars like this one, in the state of Washington:



Or another, on the North Bank of Sailor Gulch, near Boise, Idaho:



Or this one from Yuma County, Colorado:

Survivalist websites, of course, are full of root-cellar (and bunker!) plans, but I was thinking something prompted less by a gloom-and-doom sense of worry than by my hopes for a fruitful year ahead, you know? I want something romantic, like this one in Minnesota that even has a charming path leading to it, maybe (seen in full up top):

My 1880s-vintage basement, with an unmortared foundation, might have been good for root cellaring at one time in its long history, when the now-cement floor was still dirt and the stones were more stable. But it's none too inviting at this point. A dungeon, really—and I dare not actually introduce edibles to the resident mix down there, which right now is mostly small, furry and four-footed (well, plus the occasional snake in summer).

I do have a substantial bulkhead leading from it to the outdoors, and I suppose that could be lined with animal-proof mesh and turned into a repository, but it's not big enough to stay just above freezing in a deep coldspell, I fear. I'd have to crack open

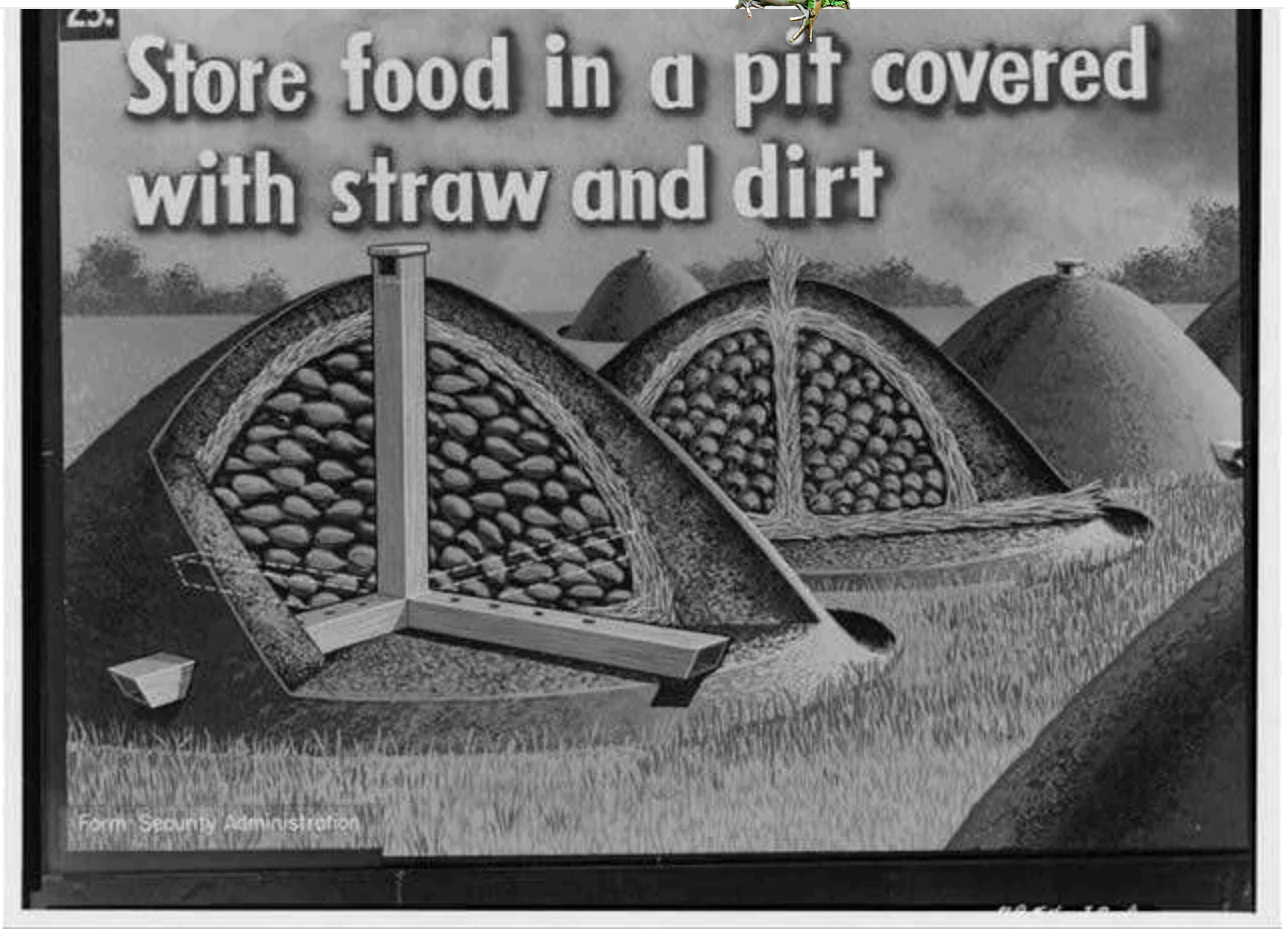
loss of heat inside. Not ideal. The other tricky part, of course, is that different fruits and vegetables prefer different temperatures and humidity levels. Lots to learn.

Apparently the primary keys to success are temperature, humidity and also one I didn't think about: ventilation. Cold air from outside needs to drop down into the cellar, and warm air needs to rise, in a sort of ongoing siphoning motion. I'm studying up on how to do that in "Root Cellaring" by Mike and Nancy Bubel, which I just bought a copy of. (I'm giving a couple of copies of it away this week; see the box below.)

In case you're interested, Gayla, I gathered some article links from among the scraps I've read these last days, before my copy of "Root Cellaring" arrived (note: that's an Amazon affiliate url). The stories I bookmarked:

- The University of Alaska-Fairbanks root-cellar pdf
- A vintage 1974 root-cellar article from "Mother Earth News"
- Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners root-cellaring article
- Another root-cellaring story, from "Organic Gardening"
- A "Hobby Farms" pdf on root cellars

Looks like I am going to have to dig a really big hole (which reminds me of this doodle by my friend Andre Jordan that had nothing to do with vegetable storage, but rather with marriage rockiness, I think). Of course I could always just pile it up in a mound…like in this wacky and wonderful 1942ish Farm Security Administration graphic:



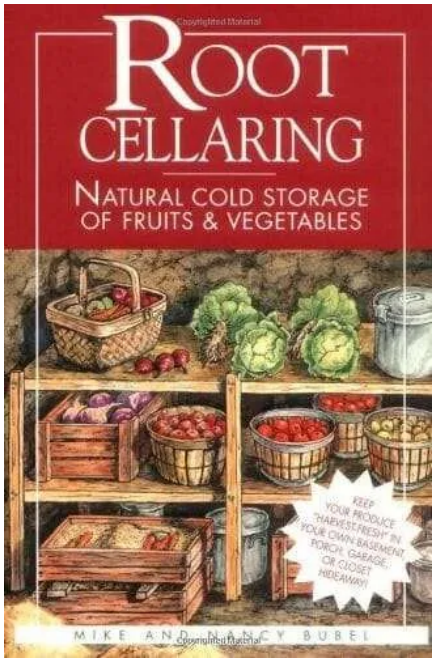
Be sure to toggle through the stash of root cellar photos over at the Library of Congress. There are even architectural drawings for many of them. Wonderful—even though they were documented in their long-past-prime condition and could use a little TLC to be put back to the test.

Speaking of which: Are you feeling inspired, or energetic? Will you and Davin and Molly be down to help excavate anytime soon? Frost is leaving the ground gradually…please hurry!

More soon.

M.

giveaway: "root cellaring" book



I'M READING "Root Cellaring" by Mike and Nancy Bubel, and maybe you'd like to read along with me. Two extra copies I bought will be up for grabs to winners chosen at random after entries close at midnight Monday, March 25. To enter, answer this question in comments below:

Do you stash any homegrown or farm-market produce into the fall and winter, and if so, where?

I mostly freeze things in soups and such, and store produce such as garlic, onions and potatoes in my insulated but unheated barn until around mid-December, then move things to the coolish mudroom in my house.

Good luck to all–and more on food storage later, when I study up a bit further.

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BETSEY — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 11:22 AM REPLY

I live in a cohousing community, and I’d love to create a cellar with some of my neighbors.

EMMIE — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 11:19 AM REPLY

My Grandpa dug a hole in the garden, lined it with straw, placed root vegetables in it, covered with more straw, then placed a heavy board over the whole. I remember going out with him to take some veggies out of it. This was in the Missouri Ozarks. Winters have snow but aren’t usually harsh.

MICHELLE BECKER — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 11:17 AM REPLY

We have two root cellars and neither of them are effective. We cannot seem to strike the right balance between humidity and temperature to satisfy the different storage requirements of a broad range of vegetables. That said, squashes in the unheated garage did well (those that were raised off the floor in a wheelbarrow..others that sat directly on the floor rotted) and potatoes are still fine in the basement. On the bright side, the root cellars are perfect for our 120 dahlias and 300 gladiolas. Freezing and

ANNE CONATSER — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 11:14 AM REPLY

I can and freeze most every kind of veggie and fruit available. I have stored in my unheated garage Butternut,Blue Hubbard, and Acorn squash in stryrofoam containers that seafood came in. During the day I cracked the lids for ventilation and on cold nights covered them well.They have kept very well, as did cabbage and potatoes.Of course, the temperature does not get as cold here in Middle Tennessee as some other parts of the U.S. so this might not work everywhere. I still want a real root cellar though!!

KRIS — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:59 AM REPLY

I don't. I have no place to keep a stash. I am hopeing to create someplace soon.

CHORAL EDDIE — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:55 AM REPLY

I was using an old (1973) VW Pop Top Camper in an insulated, but not heated, garage to store things, but I soon found that I was sharing with a family of mice. Like you I have to dig a hole.

JOANNEDENVER — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:53 AM REPLY

We harvested 50 pounds of carrots last year. I still have one bag in the freezer; I canned soup, cut or sliced some and froze them in ziplock bags, and kept some in the refrigerator. Onions lasted until January and potatoes lasted until December in the basement laundry room. I still have dried and canned tomatoes, and dried celery leaves. We are supposed to get snow this weekend!

I haven't grown enough of my own to worry about root storage, so I leave that up to the farmer who provides my year-round CSA. But, I was thinking recently, that if I grow enough this year, I might try storing my overflow in the unheated part of my cellar. It might freeze though. I definitely want to learn more for the future, though, and this book has actually been on my wish list.

MISCHELLE — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:47 AM REPLY

I have a stone-walled dirt floor cellar that is underground in the front and above grade level in the back of my 1860's house so it remains a well-ventilated (read, drafty) 40 degrees in the winter months. I thought it would be the perfect space to store veggies. Imagine my dismay the first time I toddled downstairs to grab my prized butternut squash only to discover each one had a quarter sized nibble taken out of it. Really? The critter(s) couldn't have picked one and been done with it? I knew once the skin had been broken they would rot quickly so we gorged ourselves on squash and I've never stored anything down there since. I hadn't thought of lining an area with mesh. I may try that.

JOANNE — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:47 AM REPLY

Me too. I'm in the blanch-and-freeze camp! also possess a dirt floored unseated crawl space under my house (a skunk's winter abode). would love to learn root cellar construction! my septic system is being re-newer this spring, maybe I can talk the contractor into digging an extra hole.....?!

SIDNEY — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:44 AM REPLY

My husband and I bought 10 neglected acres 3 1/2 years ago and have been clearing, planning and planting. We mostly freeze and dehydrate at this point. We are on a slope

TERRY STEWART — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:40 AM REPLY

I store potatoes and onions in a corner of our garage. I also can tomatoes, green beans, salsa, and corn. We also freeze corn, bell peppers, and some berries. Would love to have a root cellar.

TONI — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:36 AM REPLY

Thought you'd love this quote by Margaret Atwood "Gardening is not a rational act. What matters is the immersion of the hands in the earth, that ancient ceremony of which the Pope kissing the tarmac is merely a pallid vestigial remnant. In the spring, at the end of the day, you should smell like dirt."

TONI — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:28 AM REPLY

Your method is my method but I'd love a staggeringly good cellar.

LYDIA PLUNK — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:19 AM REPLY

There aren't many basements or cellars in Southern California- but it sounds nice to start a trend.

KRISTIN BELLE KNUDEN — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:13 AM REPLY

I have a cold dirt-floored cellar that is perfect for storing root vegetables and apples. There is a nifty steep-ish slope on the south side of my house that I think would be

IRENE YOUNG — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:07 AM REPLY

I freeze, can, and dry. I have also stored winter squashes in a cool mudroom. And I have tried a simple root cellar by burying a small trash can into the earth, filling it with sand, and adding root vegetables. This mix was covered with straw before putting the lid on to cover. It didn't work for me–too fussy. I have dreamed of an outdoor root cellar, dug into the side of a hill for years. The black and white photo was just the ticket.

SADHVI — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:01 AM REPLY

We bought our 1920's house with an old spring house in the back.
It's neat to think that they used it for butter and milk with a stream of water for the "refrigeration". The old ways were practical…

CONNIE — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 10:00 AM REPLY

I don't stash YET but want to set up something this year.

ANN — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 9:58 AM REPLY

five below and five foot of snow here. Our mother had the best way of storing over a ton of potatoes she raised to feed our family of eight in Dakota. Her gardens also had enough fruit and vegetables that she canned to provide other nutrients that kept us all well without help from any complicated medical insurance.

BETTY — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 9:52 AM REPLY

canned stayed better if they were in a temperature that remained steady. I loved to escape the summer heat by going in there to arrange things. Good memories.

JUDY — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 9:52 AM REPLY

We are just finishing the last of our cabbage, beets, and carrots from last year's garden right now. We had our last squash a month ago. We stored the squash in an ordinary basement, the cabbage/beets/carrots in an extra refrigerator. I surely would like a root cellar, though. My great grandparents in W. Va. had a 6×10′ shed built sort of into the side of the hill, made of rocks and wood. It's colder here, though, we'd need something more substantial.

ALECIA — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 9:50 AM REPLY

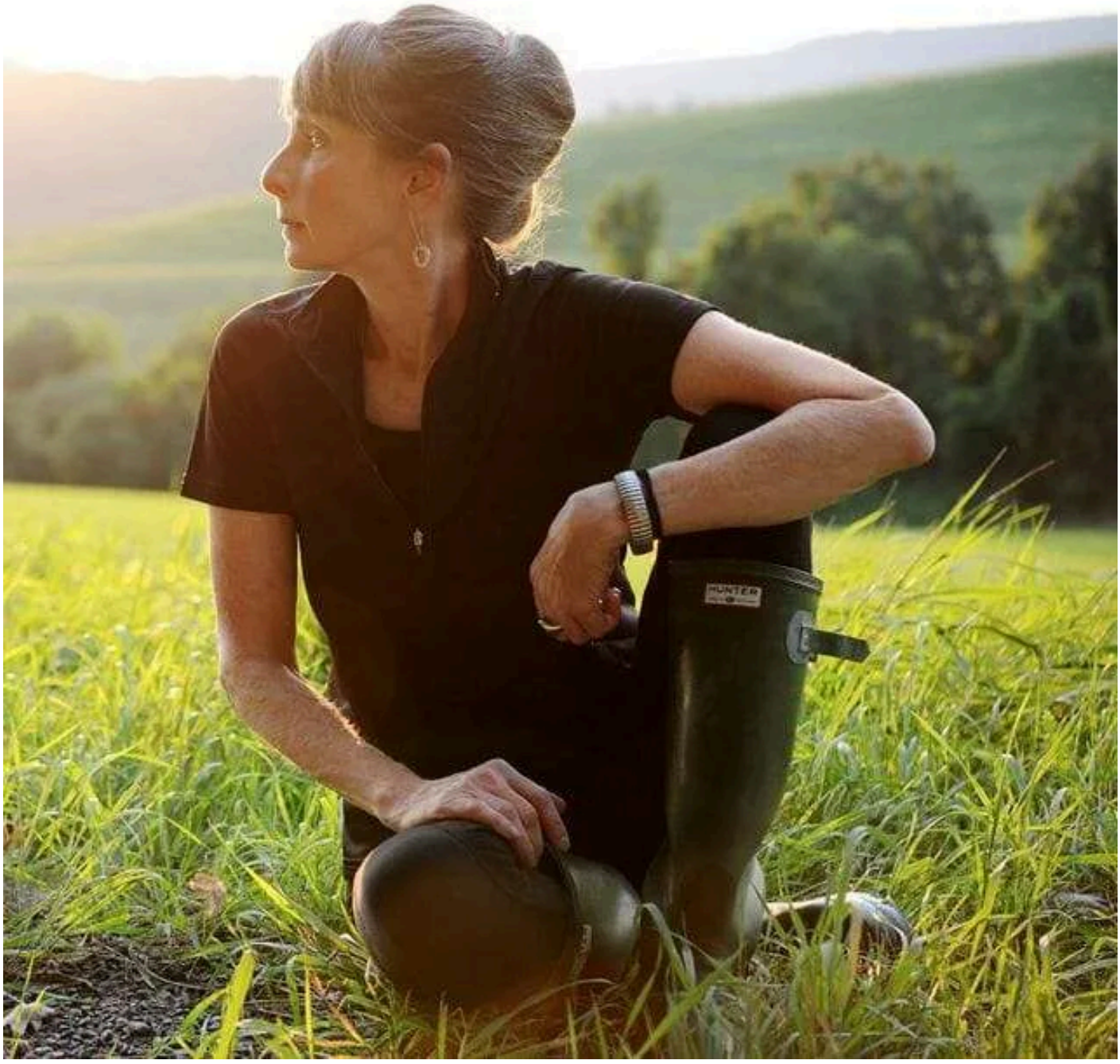
I am interested in building a root cellar, but we live in the southeast. Is it cold enough here? Currently, we store most of our produce in an extra fridge in the garage.

MARY ELLEN — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 9:32 AM REPLY

storage of fresh food is a constant battle. mostly I just buy from the farm what I can cook in the next day or two. I would LOVE a root cellar…

MELLAN — MARCH 20, 2013 @ 9:29 AM REPLY

No. If only I could! I, too feel the hunger for a root cellar. We are currently home searching and one of my priorities ia that I will have enpugh land to grow enough on that a root cellar becomea necessary! Oh, p l e a s e . . .



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at my 2.3-acre Hudson Valley (NY) Zone 6A garden, and always say no to chemicals and yes to great plants.

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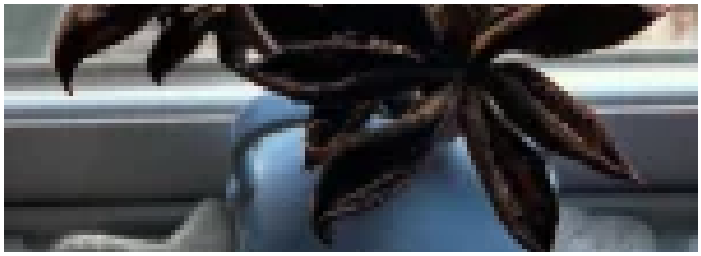

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